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On the Road
A Maharashtrian Pilgrimage

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PEOPLE impatient to get out were pushing me from behind; people anxious to get in pulled me out. Somehow I landed on my feet on the dusty platform. I gathered the few packages and made my way out of the railway station through a crowd. The reasons for the crowds became clear: today was the day of the weekly market, and the "god" on his journey had reached this town to make a day's halt. My guide and I picked our way through heaps of millet and wheat and rice, through pots and pans, through bales of cloth and saris, toys and hand-mirrors, vegetables and sweets—everything displayed on both sides of the road. Farther on, there were amusements—the revolving cradles and merry-go-rounds, gramophones shrilling loudly, a snake-charmer, a troupe of tight-rope dancers.

Today, as once every year, the image of Saint Dnyaneshwar rested for one day here on its fifteen days' march from Alandi in the Poona district to Pandharpur in the Sholapur district. People from far and near had flocked to pay respects to the great saint. Whole families had come. They would "visit" the "god," then buy in the market, amuse themselves, and go back. Thousands walked from Alandi to Pandharpur with the image of the saint, some joined later on the way, some like me hiked the twenty miles from Poona over the hills, then joined the others at this station and walked for twelve days over the plains. We cut through the crowds. My companion pointed toward the open space, "That way is 'Mother's' tent; we will be there within minutes." I was slowly getting used to the vocabulary. Saint Dnyaneshwar was referred to as *Dev,* "God," or *Māulī,* "Mother." His god *Viṭhoba*[1] was also *Dev* or *Mauli.* It is rather confusing at first but becomes quite clear because the context tells which *dev* or *māulī* is meant. I looked up and saw above the heads of people a dirty white canvas tent, with a shining golden pinnacle. The saint was represented by silver

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"This account was originally written by me in Marathi and published in *Paripurti* under the title "Vāṭcāl." It was translated into English by my husband, Dr. D. D. Karve. He showed this translation to Dr. Franklin C. Southworth of the University of Pennsylvania and the latter suggested several improvements from the point of view of the English idiom. Finally, I took the version as improved by Dr. Southworth and then made many changes to suit the mood of the narration of the original. I thank both my husband and Dr. Southworth for their respective shares in the final presentation of the paper."

[1] *Viṭhobā* ("Father Vishnu" in Marathi) is elsewhere in this account called by the regional names "Vithai," "Vitthal," and "Pandharinath" ("Lord of Pandharpur"), as well as by other universal names of Vishnu—"Hari," "Narayan," and "Krishna."

images of his feet, *pādukās*. Everyone was elbowing his way to put his head on the feet of the saint. I did not hurry; I had ample time, for after all, I was to be with the saint for the next twelve days. We went to our quarters and were welcomed by an old man. My companion, a well-known preacher and devotee, was given a seat among the men. I was led inside to a room for the women.

This was but a small hut. From where I sat, I could see Brahmin women, wearing special ritual garments, cooking food in the open courtyard. There was a small brick wall, and beyond it, just a few feet away, Maratha women were cooking food for their party, without ritual clothes.

"What is the time?"

"Half-past eleven," said somebody.

"We must hurry," said the first voice. "Pots and pans have to be scoured and washed and packed in the truck before the god starts moving."

"The meal is ready" (this from the courtyard).

Apparently the party was waiting for my companion. He and the other Brahmin man of our party put on their silken garments and took their meal. After them the women who had cooked filled their own plates and sat apart to eat; the rest of the food, with the pots, was handed over to those who, like me, were in ordinary clothes. After the meal, we washed the pots. Beyond the wall, the Marathas were also having their meal, all together and without ritual. They also finished washing their pots. As we went to load the truck, I discovered that the Marathas and we belonged to the same walking group or *diṇḍī,* which was to keep together and share the truck, but of course not the food, nor the accommodation every noon and night. Because there was a little time before the god's palanquin could start, the older women lay down for a few moments of rest. I sat against the wall and had a good look at my companions of the next few days.

There were about nine women: three were past middle age and were widows with shaved heads; about six were middle aged; and one—Tai—was very young. At the next stop, two or three more joined us. Beyond our room, in the men's group, was a gentleman whom we called Kaka. He was a member of the group singing devotional songs and he kept accounts and generally looked after the provisions. The actual shopping was done by the women, but he rendered any help that was necessary. Then there was another gentleman, the one with whom I had come. He was famous for his religious discourses and was "Guru" to everybody in the group.

I was quite new and eager to learn whatever Tai had to tell. Some things I already knew from literary sources. I knew that in the thirteenth century when Dnyaneshwar wrote or rather composed and sang in Marathi the meaning of the Sanskrit *Bhagavad Gītā,* the cult of Viṭhobā was already well established. Even then the shrine of Pandharpur was a famous place of pilgrimage. Neither my father's family nor my husband's family belonged to this cult, and so I had never gone to Pandharpur. The pilgrimage starts from Alandi where Dnyaneshwar died voluntarily at age twenty-two in the presence of hundreds of people. The silver images of his feet are taken every year in a palanquin to Pandharpur so as to reach the town the day before the first Ashadhi Ekadashi, the eleventh day of the waxing moon in June-July. Simultaneously, different "saints" born between the fourteenth and the seventeenth century and belonging to this cult also start—that is, their foot-images start—for this pilgrimage from different parts of Maharashtra. Each palanquin is accompanied by pilgrims. The

pilgrims are those who belong to the cult and go to Pandharpur each year—the *Vārkaris*—as well as those who are not members of the cult, but who have a wish to visit the god in the company of the saints.

"But what did you mean when you pointed out that woman as the mistress of our group?" I asked Tai, in my ignorance.

"Well, you see it is like this," she explained as one would to a child: "The singers, the drummer, and the old lute-player belong to a sacred school in Alandi; they and Guruji are the core of our *diṇḍī*-group. But taking these people to Pandharpur, feeding them, carrying their things, all cost money. Lay people like us want to be attached to such a group. So, people like that lady and her sister, devotees who have money and a large circle of friends, undertake to organise. We pay contributions while she and her manager hire the truck, buy the provisions, and make arrangements for the nightly halt. It is time for us to start now; the men have already left to take their place in the procession."

We got up and stood by the road. I heard the trumpet. The procession had started. Our *diṇḍī* came along. Tai bent down and took up the dust on the road. God's saints were passing today on this road. The dust under their feet was sacred. I too dipped my finger in the dust and put it to my forehead. The ritual was followed every day. We joined our own group. The *mṛdang* drum gave the rhythm, the *viṇā* lute strummed the tune, the men with two small *tāl* cymbals tied to a string around their necks marked time and sang one of the multitude of sectarian songs composed since the thirteenth century.

> The quality of compassion is to love—
> To love without thought of return—
> As a mother loves her child.

Easier said than acted! How is it possible? Or—is it so impossible? That sparrow which built its nest, which fed the little ones all day long—what did it expect in return? It mourned pitifully when my cat ate the fledging, but what did it lose? Can one order one's love at all? Does love ask one's permission before it appears? It weaves itself into the warp and woof of the heart without asking permission; the threads are pulled all the time this way and that, and may cut deep. Then men cry out with bleeding hearts, "Oh God! Please rescue us." Not only the love of the mother, but all love is without any thought of gain; that it is why it is so painful . . . or. . . .

Suddenly, my neighbour gave me a nudge. "Look at the women with the lamps." All along the main street, women were standing with lamps, rice, and cocoanuts on brass plates held in their hands to pay homage to the palanquin. I was jerked out of my thoughts and I looked round. The road was a sea of human beings. From all sides, one heard the chant of the saints' names, "Dnyanoba Tukaram," "Dnyanoba Tukaram." We crossed through the town and began to walk along the open road. The speed of walking increased somewhat. The sun was covered with clouds. A strong wind was blowing, and the dust raised by thousands of feet made the atmosphere hazy. The hilly region of Alandi, Poona, and Saswad was left behind, and we were slowly entering the high plateau of eastern Maharashtra. Still one saw a few low hills and some high mountains in the background. This year, there had been a lot of rain during the Rohini constellation in early June, and the weather was neither too dry nor too hot. Off and on, some words of the songs came to my ears—

"Bring Hari speedily to me"—
"Placed his hand on my head to caress me"—
"Vithai come soon, come soon"—

Different *diṇḍīs* sang different songs, and snatches were brought to my ears while I listened to our own group. Suddenly the procession stopped.

"What is wrong?"

"Nothing, this is the place for the 'straight' ride."

I did not understand but kept mum, watched, and did what others did. The songs had stopped. All chanted the name of the god and his divine spouse—"Vithobā-Rakhumai"—"Vithobā-Rakhumai." The singers kept rhythm with their feet. The women behind them were also moving their torsos to the rhythm—ever louder, ever faster the cymbals clashed. The crowd parted, leaving a wide straight lane; on came at a gallop two horses, one riderless, the other with a richly dressed rider holding a silver staff. Both the horses stopped near the saint's palanquin, dipped their heads, and went back again. The lines of people joined and the procession started.

"Do you see how even dumb animals are filled with devotion?" said the woman.

"But what have these horses to do with the procession?" I asked.

She pitied my ignorance and explained, "Did you see the riderless white horse? It is God's horse and has a silken saddle on its back. And the rider with the staff is God's rider. Both horses are part of the paraphernalia presented to the god [i.e., Saint Dnyaneshwar by Sardar Shitole.

I acknowledged the information and realised that the "straight" ride was over and the palanquin was moving off.

Soon we reached the place where we were to stay overnight. It was the open courtyard of a big house. Our Maratha companions lived in the open porch of the next house. Tai and I ate things left over from the morning meal and spread our beds. The older women had prepared some fresh stuff for the men, but before these arrived, I had fallen fast asleep. The other Brahmin women in our *diṇḍī* were going to eat later. Right up to Pandharpur, this was our routine. Tai got very hungry in the evening. She took her food early and I joined her. The others had various ritual regulations about eating. Some had a fast; others ate the usual food prepared in a special way, calling it ritual diet and not then putting on the ritually pure clothes; some ate only peanuts, while still others ate sago. In this way, each evening there was almost more variety than the number of the women, at the morning meal, it was the same. Some had the usual one-meal fast, some would not eat salt on Mondays, some had a regular whole-day fast on Monday, and some ate only in the evening. Moreover, special food was prepared in the evening for the men. I could not understand all this complicated business and the enormous amount of extra work it involved. I could not explain how the women did all this and why. As we proceeded on our way, the hot sun burnt our faces and left everybody looking tired and parched. The daily toil left everyone exhausted. All complained about aching feet and legs, but hardly anybody protested about the work. The older women were very lovingly looked after. The hard work and cheerful attitude of the women always surprised me.

We got up at 4.30 in the morning and finished our toilet in the dim light of a lantern. One woman drew water from the well, another took a bath, a third washed her sari. There was only one hand-wheel for drawing water from the well, and there were a hundred men and women wanting to bathe. You had just time to pour a little

water over your body and wash clothes by beating them on stones and rinsing them quickly. I never had occasion to use for bathing or washing the soap cakes which I had brought in my vast ignorance. I was accustomed to do my hair and put the red mark on my forehead in the dark and so felt no need of a mirror. I was ready before everybody else. I packed and put my bag and bedding into the truck and went out with the idea of paying homage to the sacred silver feet. The place where the palanquin had stopped for the night was about half a mile farther on from our shelter. As usual, crowds of villagers were going towards the place. The palanquin was resting in a big fallow field, and thousands of people had made their beds at night around it. Some bullock carts and pedestrians were already on the way while others were collecting their bedding, clothes, and utensils. These were the better-class farmers. There were hundreds of professional beggars and poor people. They ate whatever people gave them, spread their mat wherever they found room, and walked with the palanquin. They suffered if it rained. Fortunately this year there was not much rain; also the sky was cloudy and so there was not too much sun either.

I put my head on the *pādukās* and turned to go away, but a woman stopped me. "Watch the *pūjā*. Don't go yet." The silver feet were taken out of the palanquin, put in a silver plate, and handed over to the priest. The worship was gone through in full detail, but rapidly, because this was only a short halt on a long journey. At the end of the *pūjā,* the worshippers sang devotional songs and performed *ārati,* the waving of lamps. The hereditary servants then stood up and held a screen round the god. "What is all this now?" my ignorance queried again. The woman said, "God has been offered food. He is now having His meal. The screen is to prevent the evil eye of the onlookers from affecting Him." I was amazed at this extreme humanizing of God, of imagining Him to have qualities and a form identical with man. "Formerly, the offering in the plate before the god was actually eaten. But nowadays nobody has faith, and naturally such miracles do not take place," the woman explained to me as I came out of the tent. The devotees waiting outside rushed in, and I heard the men round the palanquin crying loudly, "Ladies, please give your contribution." The thoughts of all those rushing in were directed to the feet of the god—while the thoughts of those near the palanquin were directed to the pockets of the people. I quickly got out of this oppressive atmosphere, and soon the trumpet gave the signal to start. Every morning the god's palanquin started at 6.30, and this was the signal. I mingled with the women's group and began to walk.

We used to walk the whole day except for two or three hours around noon. Right in the front, there were the bullock carts loaded with luggage. Following them were hundreds of people in smaller or larger groups, chanting, singing, and playing various instruments. After that walked the main procession. In the vanguard was the *diṇḍī* of the untouchables, then came the god's horses, then hundreds of people carrying flags. Again I was supplied the information, "The huge orange flag carried on a pole is a sign that the man who carries it is a special type of devotee who goes to Pandharpur every month. A man hopes that when he is too old and feeble, a strong son will bear the pole and carry on his tradition." Following the banners came the wagon carrying the palanquin of the god and behind them a mile-long crowd of people on foot. There were as many women as men. The red, green, and blue saris of the women with borders and ends of contrasting colours, the red turbans and other multicoloured headgear of the men, the dull orange flags fluttering in the breeze, the black,

freshly-ploughed fields spreading for miles on both sides, the hazy hills on the distant horizon, the grass on the roadside which had turned green from recent showers, and the blue sky peeping from behind the rain clouds—I could look at all this for hours and hours and still not be satisfied. In the early afternoon, thousands of people would stop at a roadside brook, and the moving scene would become stationary for a time. The first thing everybody did at a halt was to dry the clothes which had been washed at the early morning bath. Then all the fields would be carpeted by the coloured saris spread out to dry. Blue smoke and reddish flames rose from hundreds of fires in the noon air. From morning till evening, one's ears were ringing with the sound of the cymbals and drums and the devotional verses of Tukaram, Dnyaneshwar, Eknath, Namdev, and other poet-saints. When we stayed in a house for the night, the singing within the four walls of a room often seemed discordant and the noise of the instruments unbearable. Indoors I felt oppressed, but out in the open, the sound of the bell-like cymbals was never too loud.

Except during a few still hours of early morning, all day long a stiff breeze was blowing. When I started from home, Haushi, my maid servant, had told me, "Bai, it is no use taking an umbrella. The wind is so strong that you can hardly hold it." She was right. I did not regret having forgotten my umbrella in the train. Everything was in motion in the wind-swept atmosphere—the ends of the saris of women, the branches of the trees, the stalks of millet in a few unploughed fields, the walking crowds, and the clouds overhead. I was walking on and on in a space filled with colour, sound, and wind. When I looked down, I saw innumerable feet moving up and down onward to the rhythm of *tāl* and *mṛdang*. I felt I was a drop in this vast stream of human beings, that instead of walking, I was being carried forward by the surrounding motion. Even at night when I slept, I dreamt that I was walking and when I got up in the morning, I was surprised that I lay still at the spot where I had fallen asleep.

Today, the Brahmins and Marathas in our group were camping near each other. The *diṇḍī* of course belonged to the Marathas. Every day we would walk together and camp near each other, but the food would be cooked separately. Today I said to the man who managed all on behalf of the mistress, "Buwa, please allow me to take my meals with you." Buwa agreed very readily to my request. As soon as the truck arrived, the big vessels containing the cooked food were taken down; the curry was warmed and the leaf plates arranged in two rows, one for men and the other for women. A few of the group served the food. All the women were chattering and laughing while the meal was going on. Wherever we camped for the night, the women got up in the early dawn, lighted the fire, and cooked the rice, vegetables, and chapatis. These were then packed in vessels and the mouths were tied tightly with cloth before being loaded onto the truck. The rice would still be warm when we reached the noon camp. This was easy on the women, for as the rice was warm, only the curry had to be heated. Thus people could sit down to their meals soon after we camped at noon. Then they could rest for a couple of hours till the palanquin moved, and they did not have to walk immediately after a meal. But the Brahmin group would start cooking only after reaching the noon camp place. The Brahmins had to place the stones, light the fire, bring water, cut vegetables, and then make rice, chapatis, and lentil curry; all this took at least an hour and a half. Then the men ate, after changing into the special silk dhoti; when they had finished, the women in

special clothes took out their food. Finally we others took charge of all the remaining food and ate without changing our clothes. By the time we ate, we would be hot and very thirsty. After meals, we had to take all the pots to the stream for scrubbing, put them into sacks, and load them into the truck as quickly as possible, because the truck was to go ahead to our evening camp. In this way we got hardly half an hour of rest before it was time to start.

In the Maratha group, the women did the cooking, but the men took over the serving of the food, bringing water, and loading the heavy baggage into the truck. Altogether, the men and women behaved more freely and openly with each other. Of course, they always sat in separate groups and there was no joking or laughing between them, but one noticed that there were no special inhibitions of behaviour between the two groups. On the other hand, in the Brahmin group, most of the work was done by the women. There were only two men, the guru and another. When the guru was about, everybody was very subdued and respectful. The other gentleman did carry out a few chores, but the women did most of the work. Also the routine of the Marathas was uncomplicated. There were no people who put on special clothes, and nobody had different kinds of fasts. All sat down to their meal together and all finished together; so, even though there were about fifty or sixty people in the group, everything was done quickly. Every day I regretted the fact that one and the same *diṇḍī* was divided into these two sections. All of the people were clean, and ate their food only after taking a bath. Then why this separateness? Was all this walking together, singing together, and reciting the poetry of the saints together directed only towards union in the other world while retaining separateness in this world? This question was in my mind all the time. Just as I had become friendly with the Brahmin group, the Maratha women had also taken me to their heart. As I could not bring them together, I joined now one group and now another, trying to construct a bridge, at least as far as I was concerned. After I had taken my meal with them, I felt that they were more friendly. Many of them walked alongside of me, held my hand, and told me many things about their life. Towards the end, they called me "Tai," meaning "Sister." A few of them said, "Mark you, Tai, we shall visit you in Poona." And then one young girl said, "But will you behave with us then as you are behaving now?" It was a simple question, but it touched me to the quick. We have been living near each other for thousands of years, but they are still not of us and we are not of them.

Why is this so? Are the Brahmins so heartless? Oh no! Most definitely not. If one of the Maratha women were hurt, the Brahmins would at once go to her aid and give her medicine. If some Maratha man had been hungry, the Brahmins would certainly have fed him well. But they would not take food sitting in the same row, or accept food or water from a Maratha. They had no feeling that they were doing anything wrong. Every one of them was caught up in the vicious circle of an old custom. Some were observing the traditional rules of behaviour willingly and earnestly. Others were observing those rules just because otherwise society might consider them improper. But what I could not understand was that men who in their city life came daily into contact with Christians, Muslims, and others were also behaving in the same way as the women. The tradition of the Vārkari pilgrims, the rebellion of the saints against giving importance to external matters and against hypocritical following of prescribed behaviour, the teaching of the oneness of man and deity, and above all the modern

city life—how could one reconcile these with regard for ritual purity and impurity?

On some occasions I was outraged. I do not remember the name of the town, but when we reached that place in the evening, we found that the well was far from our camp. I went there, washed my hands, feet, and face, and brought back with me a small pot full of water. Then I took out my bedroll from the truck and sat down on the verandah. Just then Buwa came to enquire if all the arrangements were satisfactory. I said, "Oh, the place is very nice, but the well is far away. Our feet are so sore from the long march that I do not know how we can bring water from such a distance." Buwa pitied our plight, made a servant scrub and clean a big copper pot, fill it with water, and place it in our quarters. I blessed him and drank from it to my heart's content. But for drinking and for making tea, the other women in my group used only the water which they themselves had brought; they employed the water sent by Buwa only for toilet purposes. The next morning we got up early as usual and went to the stream in the dark, in order to wash. A large number of people were there, cleaning their teeth, washing their mouths, and spitting into the stream. I could not bring myself to clean my mouth with the water, and took only a cursory wash. However, the women in our Brahmin group apparently felt no hesitation, took their baths with usual cries of "O Ganga! O Bhagirathi!" and even washed their mouths with the water. Apparently the spitting of members of other castes was not considered to pollute their bathing water in the stream, while the clean well water was considered polluted because it had been brought by a man of non-Brahmin caste!

It was the same story with conversation and ways of behaviour. We were on another occasion bathing in a wayside stream before dawn. We had brought two kerosene lanterns with us. When I came up from my bath, I could not find the second lantern. It had apparently been taken away by some women from our group who came later, in order to light their way to the place where they had gone in the fields, but my companion and I did not know it then. Just then another woman with a lantern in her hand came down to the bank into the stream and I asked my companion, "Can that be our lantern? Should I ask her?" But before I could say another word, my companion shouted to the woman, "Hey, you woman, whose lantern are you taking away there?" The woman turned to us defiantly and said, "The lantern belongs to me. And who are you to shout 'Hey, woman' at me?" Naturally, we were in the wrong, but my companion was surprised at her sharp retort. She turned to me and said, "Do you see how angry she became? One cannot even say 'Hey, woman' to them now!" In order not to continue the quarrel by further exchange of words, I quickly started up the bank, but could not help thinking for a long time how we do not realize the offending air of superiority in the way we speak. With all our keenness to bow down before God Pandurang and all our willingness to suffer much hardship on account of that desire, we are daily showing contempt for the living gods beside us.

But am I not being a victim of meaningless sentiment in my analysis of the existing situation? Brahmins and other castes are present in a particular social situation. Most people accept that situation; they do not feel any unjust discrimination in it. Am I making a mountain out of a molehill for nothing? No, definitely not. Have not many saints in the Vārkari cult themselves exposed this degrading differentiation between Brahmins and the others by means of many poems and many similes? Did

they not ask for justice at the feet of Pandurang? Only yesterday our *diṇḍī* was singing the song of the untouchable devotee Chokha.

> Chokha is uncouth, but his devotion is not uncouth.
> Why judge him by his exterior?

Did we sing that without understanding its meaning at all? The revulsion against social injustice is bound to be translated into action soon and not remain as mere platitudes in the verses of the saints. Are we Brahmins going to remain blind to this future? Ritual purity, pollution by one person and not by another—are we going to keep up these outward pretenses? Are we going to give up humanity and neighbourliness in the name of ritual purity? "The pure love of God . . ." Are we never going to be worthy of that love?

Fortunately there was not much time for me to spend in these fruitless and bitter thoughts. The whole atmosphere was full of joy. Not that there were no quarrels, no abusive words, but such occasions were very few. If anyone used bad language or became angry, the others would say, "You must not do that while we are on the way to Pandhari," and the offender would be ashamed and fall silent. I saw this several times. Many of us used to walk a mile or so ahead of the palanquin and sit down to rest under a tree. Different groups got together under a tree in this way, and the women would press each other to sing a song. From the language and subject of the song and the way it was sung, I would try to guess from which part of the country the singer had come. Once, while I was sitting under a tree, I heard the words "Male, Tule" and I at once got up and joined the group. "Are you from Khandesh?" I asked one of the group. "No," she replied, "We belong to the Ghat (plateau)." My companion, who was from Poona, remarked, "They do not speak like the people from Maval. How can they be from the plateau?" I told her, "The 'Ghat' she means is the plateau near Aurangabad or perhaps near Buldana." The women were very happy to hear this and finding that I knew their country, they told me that they came from near Ellora in Aurangabad district. I asked, "What caste do you belong to?" One of them told me that they were of the Warik caste. Then I quoted the verse of a poet-saint, "We are Wariks and we shave very smoothly." At once the woman smiled at me with great satisfaction and said, "Oh, you know just the right thing." That group had nearly fifty men, women, and children all belonging to the barber caste. They had come by train to Poona and had been walking with the palanquin right from the start at Alandi. Some men and women had come from as far as Bidar, Bid, Parbhani, Jalna, even Nanded. They always said they came from "Gangthadi"—the bank of the river Ganga. Every sacred river is "Ganga" and in Maharastra the river Godavari especially is called "Ganga" or "Gangabai."

Once we were going along in the morning, and just in front of us was a bullock cart full of baggage with three or four children seated on top. One boy in the group was howling loudly because he did not want to sit in the cart as his mother was forcing him to do. He was making a racket and kicking with his feet while his mother held a millet stalk in her hand and pretended to threaten him, smiling all the time. "We went out to see the god in the morning and I thought that since the poor child has already walked a lot, he would be happy to ride in the cart. But now he has started this game! Wait, I will break your head for you," said the mother, and rushed at

him. She was followed by the other woman shouting, "Oh, don't! Don't!"

While this chase went on ahead, a young woman came up from behind, holding a child whom she could scarcely carry. I asked, "Why is your child crying?" She replied, "He just will not walk! All the time he says, 'Auntie, please pick me up!' I thought he should walk for a couple of miles in this cool morning. But he begins to wallow on the road, and so I am just dragging him along." "The irony of it! That other child is crying because he wants to walk and this one is howling because he does not want to walk. Let this one sit in the cart and let that one walk." Meanwhile a man came along, took up the child on his back, and the woman began to walk with us. She was a Maratha by the name of Pawar and came from Jogaiamba. The child was her dead sister's son. She had started for Pandharpur and was already out of town when her brother-in-law brought the child and asked her to take him along. The child had just one shirt, not even anything to cover himself with at night, and the poor girl would be carrying him along on the pilgrimage for a fortnight. Another day I saw her sitting with the child in a group of men and women. We also sat down for a little rest. She was massaging her arms. "Are you very tired?" I asked. "What can I do?" she asked. "The whole day I have to carry the child on my back. I don't feel any pleasure in living." "Oh! But he will repay all your troubles when he is older," I tried to console her. "I don't think so at all! Yesterday he bothered me so much that when I reached our halting place in the evening, I gave him a sound beating. Do you know, he said, 'I will strangle you!'" She also joined in our laughter and the naughty boy turned his face away and smiled.

So, I was getting to know my Maharashtra anew every day. I found a new definition of Maharashtra: the land whose people go to Pandharpur for pilgrimage. When the palanquin started from Poona, there were people from Poona, Junnar, Moglai, Satara, etc. Every day people were joining the pilgrimage from Khandesh, Sholapur, Nasik, Berar. As we neared Pandharpur, the pilgrimage was becoming bigger and bigger. All were Marathi-speaking people—coming from different castes, but singing the same songs, the same verses of Vārkari cult, speaking to each other, helping each other, singing songs to each other. The only Maharashtrian area not represented was Konkan, the district of the Maharashtrian seacoast. When I enquired about this, I was told that the Ashadh month's pilgrimage was for the plateau people; the month of Kartik would bring out the whole of Konkan. Ashadh was their time for work in the fields, so naturally, they could not leave. On the plateau, the fields had already been ploughed, and there was now spare time before the sowing. All areas were devoted to the god of Pandharpur, but neither the coastal people nor the plateau people neglected their fields to show their devotion.

I witnessed how the language and culture of Maharashtra had spread among all its social layers. The fine poetry of five centuries was recited daily. That poetry embodied a religion and a philosophy. People speaking many dialects sang the same verses and thus learned a standard language. Their learning was achieved in a massive dose but without pain or compulsion. Every one was laughing and joking during the march. Nobody pressed people to join the pilgrimage. No public announcement of the programme was made, and the outside world might just as well not exist. The pilgrims were intoxicated with happiness; anyone who had a heart, who had the insight, could have the same joy.

One day I became particularly aware of the difference between culture and literacy.

While we were resting in our midday camp, I looked up the road and saw a pair of missionaries. They had little pamphlets in their hands and had come to spread the religion of the Lord Christ. After the first two or three days, they must have despaired and gone away, for I did not see them during the later stages of the pilgrimage. I was very angry with them, but the people in my group just laughed at the whole thing. That pair was certainly literate in Marathi, but had not even a trace of understanding of Maharashtrian culture. Different human societies express their sense of beauty and sanctity, and the goodwill in their hearts, in different ways; to learn the value of these different manifestations and at least to try to understand what others believe before insisting that one's own beliefs are the only right ones—is this not the sign of wisdom? "The quality of compassion is to love—to love without a thought of return." To love humanity without any desire for gain—is not that the means to true wisdom? But the followers of monotheism—political, social, or ethical—can never understand this. Particularly the servants of Christ, who for the last two or three centuries have conquered and ruled different human societies all over the world and trampled upon their cherished values, are not likely to realise this.

I could never really find out how many songs, poems, and stories these illiterate women knew by heart. During the whole journey, I never heard the same song twice. There was great temptation to take down the songs, but I had started from home with the vow that I would not touch book, notebook, or pencil. Besides the usual women's songs, others were of the devotional type common among the Vārkaris. There was a surprising variety of songs—gondhal, kheliye, gaulani, everything was there. One woman who knew I was teaching at Poona taunted me, "This is better than your colleges. Have your students this education and this discipline?" Naturally I did not agree with her, but though this was not a college, the three characteristics of education were present here: the preservation of traditional knowledge, its cultivation, and its transmission to the next generation. This education was also many-sided. Besides religion and philosophy, the three arts of music, dancing, and drama were included in it, and it also encompassed the living together for some time of the whole society. Not that the music was of a very high quality, but in addition to the traditional simple tunes, attempts were made to put them into classical *rāgās* with the rhythm of the mṛdang drum. I had already heard the Bhairavi, Kafi, Bhoop, Sarang, Jaijaivanti, Durga, and Malkansa *rāgās*. The day we left Phaltan, it was raining. A singer of that town had come with us for a couple of miles, and the morning's songs tunefully sung by him and repeated after him by our group are still fresh in my ears. So absorbed was I that only after the singer had gone back did I realise that we had been walking in the rain for over an hour.

Five times on the way, we witnessed the horses paying homage to the saint in *rangaṇ* performances. For a *rangaṇ,* the palanquin is taken into the centre of a large field while thousands of spectators sit or stand round it in a big circle. Leaving a wide circular passage round the spectators, the devotional singers form an outer circle and continuously repeat the names of the saints, or chant, "Viṭhobā Rakhumai!" Both horses make three or five circuits through the passage at a fast trot, bend their heads down in front of the palanquin, and go away. Then all the people play *jhimmā, phugḍyā,* and the like—games of hand-clapping, reeling, and leap-frog. The men's games are rather rough and fast, and women do not take part in them. Even if someone takes a tumble, he does not get hurt very much in the soft fields. Finally, all the

members of the *diṇḍīs* dance round the palanquin in a circle and then the palanquin moves on.

The performance of *bhārūḍ* stories also takes place in an open field. *Bhārūḍ* is a kind of folk-drama, in which the different actors explain some ideas of Vedantic philosophy. A single actor may perform a series of roles, making lightning changes in his dress and make-up. Thus as a king's astrologer, he puts on an old pair of spectacles and a big turban two feet in diameter; as soon as that part is over, he throws away those paraphernalia and takes up another role and its costume. Adding to the original philosophic compositions of Eknath, the actor often puts a number of his own words into the *bhārūḍ* and accompanies them with gestures. The interpolated words are sometimes obscene, but the gestures may be particularly so. This crude form of theatrical art never lasts for longer than about half an hour. Men and women listen to it, laugh to their heart's content, and forget everything as soon as they take to the road again.

Erotic representations and imagery have been a part of religious festivals from very ancient times. In the olden Brahmanical sacrifices which went on for days and months, there were always some parts which were purely for amusement, for sexual excitement, and for entertainment. In fact there are some who insist that all drama originates in religion and magic. Why should such entertainment be obscene? It could well do without the sexual slant. Of course none of the well-known discoursers on religion, who are deeply learned and respected, participate in the *bhārūḍs*. The actors in these are half-educated persons. Their easiest ways to make people laugh are to use shameless gestures and sentences with a double meaning. This has been going on from very ancient times, and if in a whole fortnight of continuous singing of devotional poetry there is a little—really very little—of this kind of diversion, one need not object to it. If the low thoughts that are present in everybody's mind can be given some outlet in this harmless way and for such a short time, and if they disappear from ordinary life at other times, occasional obscenity would be really a small price to pay.

There is always a considerable amount of latitude given to obscene or disgusting sentiments in poetry which praises renunciation. To give as offensive a description as possible of the worldly life while recommending renunciation is a very old trick, and the Vārkari tradition is no exception to it. One such poetic song is a long composition known by the name of "Madālasā." The story goes that a royal lady named Madālasā advises her baby princes, while they are still in their cradles, to give up the temptations of this life; the sons thereupon renounce the pleasures of this life and become ascetics. The song brings together the advice Madālasā gave to her sons, punctuated by the refrain, "Madālasā spoke—'I am He.' Sleep child, sleep." I heard this song three or four times. The Vārkaris may perhaps be inspired towards renunciation by it, but what I found disgusting was not the worldly life, but the poem.

> The human body, under the attractive looking skin is full of blood and flesh and such other stuff; the body contains excreta, faeces, and urine; the nose is full of mucus; this beautiful body decays with disease and old age—and therefore, O men, give up this life of enjoyment, adopt celibacy, and retire from the affairs of the daily life.

This advice is directed towards men, and rightly enough. A woman brings into this world a shapeless mass of flesh, feeds the hungry being every three or four hours,

washes its soiled clothes, and cleans its body; and when gradually the bundle of flesh begins to take on colour and form and smiles at her, she feels herself the happiest being on earth. Such a mother knows quite well what the human body is made of, and a description is not likely to engender renunciation in her mind. When men become ascetic, the only thing they forgo is sex. Otherwise, they are being well looked after. Even in the absence of a wife, they get tasty and well-prepared food: a mother or sister by blood or by sentiment cooks for them. It is always women who come forward to serve a celibate with devotion and real attachment.

I found an interesting example of feminine devotion in this pilgrimage. As we neared Pandharpur, palanquins from different parts of Maharashtra joined the Dnyaneshwar palanquin. The camp before Pandharpur became a huge city of palanquins and *diṇḍīs*. Every part of Maharashtra was represented there. There was Tukaram Maharaj from Dehu, Sopankaka from Saswad, Muktabai from Khandesh, Rakhumai herself from Amraoti—all of them were there. This year there was the palanquin of Ramdas from Sajjangad near Satara, which joined us on the way. The carriers of the palanquin were all men, but accompanying it and waving the yak-tail brush (to keep away flies) were women. A man who ran away in the midst of his wedding ceremony in order to escape leading the family life was surrounded by women after his death! It made me smile. It is always women who come forward to render service to such renouncers. Very often such devotion is completely without any ulterior motive. When I saw some woman whose life had been devastated by early widowhood, lacking a family of her own children, but caring for the Guru, seeing that he got warm, tasty food, then I valued more the tender heart of the woman than the strict celibacy of the Guru. "The quality of compassion is to love—to love without thought of return." Once I had heard the song of Madālasā, I found myself bored with listening to it again and again. My thoughts used to wander into history. I wondered how and when the status of the householder in the Hindu social system had lost its honoured place, and how celibacy and renunciation had assumed more and more importance.

The Vārkari sect itself insisted that the transcendental *brahman* was too difficult a concept to grasp. One could reach it gradually through loving worship of an incarnate god. Its saint showed devotion to Viṭhobā on the level of human passion using the imagery of a lover towards his beloved. Its god was the dark Vithobā, who was none other than Lord Shri Krishna, the lover of many women. They chanted the name Viṭhobā but always with the name of his wife Rakhumai, whose love story, too, is part of the Vārkari literature. The Gita which induced Arjuna to accept his duty in this world was the sacred book of the Vārkari saints—and on the other hand, there was all this preaching of celibacy and renunciation! How were these two to be reconciled? The Vedas taught one to become immortal through begetting progeny and perpetuating the race. The land was once filled with smoke from sacrifices of the Kurus and Panchalas who wanted sons to be born to them; Manu told of several ways of obtaining a son if there was no son born to a person. Shabarswami, an old commentator, wrote, "One should remain at the teacher's house for twelve years after initiation for the usual education. If one wishes to become a specialist in some branch, one may remain with the teacher and devote oneself to study as a celibate. But one who preaches celibacy for a longer period is probably a eunuch."

While the merits of a married life were being praised on the one side, the life of seclusion in a forest and the philosophy of the Upanishads was developing on the

other. Buddhism and Jainism based themselves on the latter philosophy, propagating the great value of the ascetic life and the worthlessness of the normal life of work and pleasure. But the popularity of the ascetic religion depended upon a peculiar social contradiction. The livelihood of the men and women who renounced the ordinary pursuits and lived the life of beggars with very few wants, ultimately needed the support of wealthy royal houses or the rich merchants who lived in the cities like Vaishali and Shravasti. A well-to-do and generous society of householders was the essential precondition for the edifice of a religion of renunciation and ascetism. The history of this great transformation in the value system of the Hindus is as important as it is interesting. But songs like that of Madālasā are neither entertaining nor ennobling.

The song of Madālasā had ended some time back. I felt there was some change in the atmosphere. In a moment, I heard the words of Dnyaneshwar's well-known song—

Caw, Caw!
A crow in the courtyard.
Are you giving a good omen?
Will the King of Pandhari be my guest?
If you bring Him,
I'll put golden anklets round your feet.

Yes, the mood of the group had definitely changed. I too breathed more easily. The leader of our *diṇḍī* always showed this kind of judgment. Once, after the "Madālasā" song, he had started the verses of Dnyaneshwar's sister, Muktabai. Once in anger, the saint had locked the door of his room. In these verses, Mukta had begged him to open the door of his room and of his heart. The tenderness of this poem had dispersed my gloom. Another time, when the evening halt was some distance away and we were weary, the men could not find any enthusiasm in the usual hymns. But then our leader began the song—

We'll tell no lies,
Nor spread false news.
An ant gave birth to a colt
And how much milk had she?
Seventeen barrels full.
And fourteen elephants drank
All that was left over.
We'll tell no lies,
Nor spread false news.

And everybody at once smiled. That particular song, which all of us had heard as children, made everyone laugh, and we reached the camping place in no time at all. When there was a *rangaṇ,* I felt as if it was a circus. When the games started, everybody forgot the hardships of the journey. The *bhārūḍ* performances were given occasionally, always interspersed with devotional songs or absurd songs. The repetition of God's name was going on almost incessantly and helped to keep the spirit happy and calm in spite of the long and arduous marches.

This does not mean that all the pilgrims were happy. This communal living, this sharing, brought both joy and sorrow. So many unhappy and bereaved persons were

walking the road to Pandharpur! On the way they opened their hearts and unburdened their sorrows to their travelling companions. They tried to get consolation and sympathy and hoped to gather the strength to bear their misfortunes. And what sorrows there were! Each of a different kind, but still each sharing much with the others.

One day, we were sitting under a tree, speaking about this and that. What else do women speak about, but, "How many children have you?" and "What does your man do?" I asked the same of the handsome woman next to me. Her eyes filled with tears and she said, "No, there aren't any children to play in our house. Such a large house and just the two of us—he and I. No quarrels, nothing. But what can we say to each other all the time? So, I am going to the feet of Pandurang." "I suppose you want to put your sorrow at his feet?" I asked. "Oh no!", she said, "Doesn't he know it? He will do what he thinks is the best. One must live as he wills."

Again one day we were resting from the hot midday sun. Near us was a group of three or four women. One of the women was feeding a boy at her breast and tears were rolling down from her eyes.

"What is the matter, my dear? Don't you feel well?" I asked.

"It's the little one," she answered.

She came from the region near Bid. They had been on the road for a month. The poor child was hot with fever. In sun and rain and wind, the child had been carried on her back and one would have been surprised if the child was not now suffering from anything.

"But how could you bring such a small child?"

"How can I explain?" she started, "All the neighbours were going. They wanted me to go with them. I said my baby was too young. They retorted, 'With all the care you have given to your home and children, have not many children died? Don't be afraid, come with the little one. Why not go to the feet of Pandurang while you have the strength?' So I came. But for the last two days, the baby hasn't even opened its eyes." I pointed to the government medical van accompanying the pilgrimage and told her that they would give free medicine to her. She used to buy milk every day and give it to the baby. How could she know that it should have been boiled?

"Give hot tea with milk to the baby and it will perspire and the fever will go. Vitthal won't let you suffer."

She went to the medical van. Just then I saw an old man who was lying down with his head on his turban just beyond the group.

He said to me, "She is not the sort to do the pilgrimage. She cries when the child gets fever. One must be satisfied with whatever God gives us."

I was a little riled at this pontifical attitude and retorted, "You can talk like this, but only one who suffers really knows."

But the old man continued. "You know, Vitthal is a very hard god. If your heart gets entangled with something, he tears it out. Look at me. I had a wife and children and a home. But a single epidemic killed them all in a few days. Then I sold the house, sold everything, and said to God, 'You are the only one I have.' "

As my *dindi* was approaching, I got up, gave him some money for a cup of tea, and started walking, but not before I heard the words, "God, you thought I should drink some tea! O Pandurang, O Narayan!"

I also used to see an old woman off and on. Once somebody asked her, "Grandma,

where are your children, your grandchildren? What do they do?" The old woman closed her eyes, her face became strangely desolate, and she began to shake. We all got frightened, went near her, and held her tightly with our arms.

"Grandma, please wake up. Drink this water," said I.

Her frail body was shivering in my arms. And then I remembered. I had a dog once and her puppy died; she had also shivered like that and I had drawn her to myself and felt her body quivering in my arms. How near we are to the animals, I had thought! After some time, the old woman stopped shaking. Tears streamed down from her closed eyes and the dumb grief found words. She told her story. And what was her sorrow? Hers was of the same kind as the others: her only son had died in his early twenties. These sorrows were not the result of any social inequalities, nor were they caused by any political turmoil or war. These were human sorrows, and would disappear only when human beings disappear. They were there for the rich and for the poor, for the young and the old; they encompassed the whole of humanity. The old woman told her story, stopped, gave a deep sigh, and said, "O Pandurang, one must live as You will." I bit my lip and said to myself, "'*Tena tyaktenā bhunjītāh*' Yes, you can enjoy only that which He allows for your use. Only that which this greedy, all-taking Lord does not take, remain for us." And the words of the old man came back to my mind: "Pandurang is a very hard god! If your heart gets entangled somewhere, he tears it out." But God! Why do You let it get entangled in the first place? You allow it to be completely enveloped and then cruelly tear it to shreds. What greatness do You find in this? What pleasure do You get in bringing such tired, torn hearts, shedding tears of blood, to Your feet? Would it not be better if in the dawn of life, the blossoming flower in the mild early morning sun of happiness is plucked and used for Your worship?

Oh but I was out of my mind! The agony of the old woman made me forget the world for a moment. Who brings whom to his feet? It is all a play of the human mind. First it creates a god with qualities out of a completely indifferent, formless, and attributeless principle, then makes him the author of everything that happens, makes him the Lord of the Universe, and then says "We can only have what He does not take."

Every one of us was deep in her sad thoughts when one woman started singing, "I care not if I live or die, for my heart is ever with Thee, Pandurang." All of us mingled our voices with hers. A moment later, the old woman also joined in her shaky voice: "Pandurang, I swear, my heart is with Thee." After some time the shadows of sorrow melted away. All had their sorrows, and still we could bear them in each other's company.

Is religion a kind of opium? Human civilization has created many kinds of opiates and wines. Opium makes a man forget the world and become sleepy. Wine makes him offensive. Both are methods of forgetting the existing situation. Somebody creates a god, somebody a science, somebody a political *ism*. Have not all those thousands of scientists pursuing their studies, forgetting everything else, partaken of a kind of opium? The ones who let out the cry that modern science is the agency for making mankind happy are clearly intoxicated with the wine of knowledge. From Buddha to Marx, there have been many profound philosophers who wanted to eliminate the sorrows of society by social reorganization. Yet we see not only that the old sorrows have not been eliminated, but that new sorrows have been added to the list. And then

man takes opium or alcohol, forgets the sorrow, and says, "We have progressed. We are at the dawn of a happy world . . ."

That was the last day on the road. By evening the companions of all those days would part. Each one would go to his or her place of residence. I had an uneasy feeling—my eyes were filling again and again.

Haushi had told me, "The last bit of the plateau is called, 'Weeping Plateau.'"

"But why?"

"Oh, you have got to cry when you walk there."

All around me, people were saying good-bye to each other. I could find no words—I could only nod to the companions in my *diṇḍī* to say good-bye and start on ahead. Then came the entrance gate to the town. But somehow I was feeling restless. I could not see Him, who had been there, sometimes in the *diṇḍī,* sometimes ahead of us, sometimes under a tree, and sometimes near the well. When I turned round, I saw His back and He was marching away in the opposite direction. "Why, Dark One, are You leaving too? Are You not coming into Pandharpur?" He smiled and shook his head. "Where are you off to?" Without a word, He merely waved His arm and began to walk fast. The black ploughed fields and the sky full of heavy black clouds soon engulfed that delicate dark figure with the blanket on His shoulder. And I stepped inside the gates of Pandharpur with streaming eyes, weary legs, and a heavy heart.